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### Communities and networks in support of knowledge sharing. Part 2

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## COMMUNITY NOTE

### Communities and networks in support of knowledge sharing. Part 2

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This is the second of a two-part Community Note looking at the strategic applications of online communities and networks in development cooperation. This first part looked at how communities and networks are used to share knowledge and learn with case studies provided by members of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community. This second part considers how communities are connecting people, as well as their creation and support.

I was asked to be part of the writing team for the upcoming Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) Information Management Resource Kit (IMARK) module on knowledge sharing. I was assigned the units on the use of communities and networks for knowledge sharing. Because I find stories and examples of real communities and networks the best way to showcase the diversity of use, I asked my fellow members of the KM4Dev (Knowledge Management for Development)<sup>1</sup> community to offer their examples. I was happily flooded with pointers. Because the contributions of the community were so significant, we thought it might be nice to share an adaptation of the lesson as a series of two ‘Community Notes’ here. I thank the following for their important contributions to this article: Bonnie Brusky, Charles Dhewa, Snezana Jovic, Ruth Meizen-Dick, Neil Pakenham-Walsh, Jaap Pels and Loe Schout.

Many of the examples of networks and communities offered in Part 1 did something important: connect people interested in something to others likewise interested. Some of them may be experts, some may be new to the field, but everyone has knowledge to share and at some point needs to learn something new. Finding and connecting to each other is critical. In Part 2, I include examples of communities that do a good job at connecting people, most often in addition to other things like learning, sharing, creating and supporting. I close with a section on the importance of the quality of communities and networks.

Communities and networks can offer tangible, strategic value in our work. They can help people share knowledge, learn, connect with other practitioners, create new knowledge or knowledge materials and support the development of the communities and networks themselves. To get this value, there are contextual tips that we can use, often having to do with how we facilitate and support. Because communities and networks are ‘places’ for people to learn and work together, it matters how we pay attention to both the social and content aspects!

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## Connecting people

### *Healthcare information for all by 2015*

Healthcare Information For All by 2015 (HIFA2015) is a thriving example of an organization creating the ‘space’ for people to connect around a shared goal to create a world where people are no longer dying for lack of basic health care knowledge. HIFA2015<sup>2</sup> is a global campaign and knowledge network administered by the Global Healthcare Information Network, a non-profit organization working to improve the quality of health care in developing countries. HIFA2015 brings together more than 3000 health workers, librarians, publishers, researchers and policymakers from 150 countries worldwide, all committed to a common goal: By 2015, every person worldwide will have access to an informed health care provider. HIFA2015 currently receives financial support from the British Medical Association, ePORTUGUESe/World Health Organization and Network for Information and Digital Access.

What makes the community stand out as an excellent connector is seen through many of the member testimonials that talk about the value of connecting with other colleagues.

#### **Box 1. Testimonials**

*Through HIFA2015 I have found colleagues with whom we can forge potential collaborations. Even as I write, one of my students at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, is engaged in conducting an important exploratory research on Telehealth care in Papua New Guinea. One of main contacts in PNG was identified through HIFA2015. This is likely to develop into a good project and I think HIFA2015 should be thanked for its role as a good source of networking. (Arin Basu, Senior Lecturer in Health Sciences, University of Canterbury, New Zealand).*

*I joined HIFA 2015 after the first-ever Global Health Workforce Forum in Kampala in March 2008 and have found the group unique and important for 3 reasons: (1) The exchange provides a rapid overview of timely, relevant issues articulated from a refreshingly diverse set of perspectives; (2) The threads of conversation are varied and well moderated, moving in a timely way from topic to topic; (3) I can quickly and efficiently make contact and stay in touch with an extremely diverse group of colleagues with one overarching common interest – improving health of people in the world using evidenced-based approaches. I have recommended the group to many other colleagues, particularly those involved in humanitarian health efforts, as one way to bridge our silos to shift our efforts from surviving to thriving in our personal and professional efforts. HIFA2015 and Child Healthcare Information and Learning Discussion Group 2015 (CHILD2015) combine 3 types of capital – ‘intellectual capital’ (i.e. the knowledge brought from the literature and experience) as well as bridging ‘social capital’ (sharing our knowledge across disciplines and communities and continents); and ‘technologic capital’ (i.e. using the latest networking technology to encourage and efficiently handle complex internet interchanges). (Karen Hein, Professor of Epidemiology & Population Health and (Clinical) Pediatrics, Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, USA).*

*Within the short few months that I have joined HIFA2015. I have received a great tutorial DVD that has taught me a great way to repair the common but very distressing vesico-vaginal fistula (VVF), a knowledge which I am going to share with the Association of Rural Surgical Practitioners of Nigeria (ARSPON) . . . I have become*

*conscious that I must share my experiences with others, and look forward to learning from the vast experience of others in all parts of the continent and beyond. I always thought that my part of the world was the worst there is, but I was amazed that others had problems that made me wish I could go out there and assist!* (Shima Kaimom Gyoh, Professor of Surgery, College of Health Sciences, Benue State University, Makurdi, Nigeria).

HIFA2015 is attentive to how people interact, both wanting people to get high value out of the email conversations and for people to be able to connect with each other. They use a process called reader-focused moderation (for more information see Pakenham-Walsh 2007).

Here are some tips from Neil Pakenham-Walsh, the community's moderator:

- For email-based communities, think from a reader's point of view. Ensure as far as possible that every message that is distributed to members is relevant, easily readable and understandable (including for people who may be relatively unfamiliar with the subject or who have English as a second language).
- Where necessary, add a discreet 'moderator's note'. For example, explain an acronym that may not be obvious to all readers or refer to sender. If an incoming message says very little (e.g. 'I agree' or 'Here is an interesting article . . .'), then go back to the author and invite them to say a little more before forwarding it to the group.
- Pay special attention to the wording of the subject line.
- Get to know your community. Welcome one-to-one every member who joins the group.
- Consider having a personal profile for every member – a signature profile that is added to the bottom of any message they may send to the group, so that people know each other's background.

### ***Finding networks***

Sometimes we have to find the network, before we can participate and benefit. Today there are so many different options in development and in humanitarian aid. That is why it is very useful when organizations help identify existing networks and make them visible and findable. For example, the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) Bioversity maintains a list of crop networks.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations (UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) created a directory of online networks and communities of humanitarian professionals housed on ReliefWeb website.<sup>4</sup> ReliefWeb itself is a network of communities for humanitarian relief, providing more connection opportunities, as well as a site-aggregating sector.<sup>5</sup> The Information and Knowledge Management Emergent (IKM Emergent) also has a list of information- and knowledge-related networks.<sup>6</sup> It is important that someone pay attention to the 'bigger view' across networks.

Tips for looking across networks:

- If you provide a listing of communities and networks, make sure it is updated regularly. Things can change fast.
- Think about what would attract people to learn about the 'connection' services you are offering. Often, the latest news in the topic of interest can be a good

attractor. This helps you get value out of the time you put into maintaining lists of networks.

- Publicize the list regularly, not just once.

### ***Business in Zimbabwe Network***

Connecting people interested in shared issues can help raise the visibility and sometimes even the professional view of an issue and the people involved. The Business in Zimbabwe Network (BIZNET) is such a community.<sup>7</sup> See how they describe themselves in the text box. Notice how many partners are involved, connecting to be stronger together, than being scattered and apart.

#### **Box 2. BIZNET**

BIZNET is a knowledge-sharing forum for Business Development Service (BDS) providers in Zimbabwe. The formation of a strong and sustainable BDS Network in Zimbabwe is being driven by the Zimbabwe National Chamber of Commerce (ZNCC), the Zimbabwe Opportunities Industrialization Centres (ZOIC), the UN Industrial Development Organisations (UNIDO), the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (HIVOS) and SNV Netherlands, among other organizations. The Government of Zimbabwe is represented on the network by the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises Development; Ministry of Women Affairs, Gender and Community Development as well as the Ministry of Youth Development and Employment Creation.

Tips:

- Consider getting a group of organizations to support a network. This may attract more diverse participants and lend the credibility of those organizations.
- Consider not just what the network will do for your organization's needs, but how it can also help individual members (as in professional standing in this case).

### **Creating new knowledge together**

#### ***International Forum for Rural Transport and Development***

International Forum for Rural Transport and Development (IFRTD) decided that the network research approach that they were using for their work was so promising, there needed to be a manual so it could spread more widely. This is an example of a network creating something together. By tapping into the knowledge and expertise of the network – as well as the time of its members – they were able to create the manual.<sup>8</sup>

Networked research is a framework for conducting development research that builds ownership, communication and advocacy into the overall design of the research programme. Through this process-oriented approach, international researchers are given the opportunity to work together to a common analytical framework, to cross-pollinate one another's work, to complement each other's research capacities and to participate in the synthesis and bringing together of the key issues. What is interesting is that the approach is another example of the power of networks.

Tips:

- If your community creates or learns something of value, consider creating an artefact – a report, web page, manual or whatever – to spread your learning more widely.
- The practice of creating something together can be a great activity and focus for a community, bringing them both closer together and having greater shared meaning about work. You know what they say, ‘to know it, you must teach it!’

### ***The KS toolkit***

Time and time again many international NGOs have found value in knowledge-sharing and facilitation methods and tools. Wanting to let their members know more about, learn and access them, they would start creating resources listing the methods, sharing stories in use. Pretty soon these ‘tool kits’ were being created over and over again, often wasting time and resources: organizations kept paying consultants to do the work again. Finally in 2007 the CGIAR, which had a publicly viewable KS toolkit, decided that it was time to ‘go bigger’ and create a valuable resource that they could use internally and make available externally. Thus the KS Toolkit.org<sup>9</sup> was born. Soon colleagues at FAO (The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations) wanted to pitch in, and added their support. KM4Dev, the global network on knowledge management for development, which had been creating a similar wiki, decided it was time to share the work and value as well.

The resources in the toolkit draw from the great work of many organizations such as the Swiss Development Agency (SDC), CARE, the Overseas Development Agency (ODI) and others. But it is more than a listing of the methods, including stories, links to related materials and contacts of practitioners who can ‘tell me more’ about a tool or method. This way, everyone can benefit from not only the information but also the experiences of using the information. The kit is a living resource, always growing and changing, thanks to the global network of practitioners, both within the sponsoring organizations and way, way beyond, creating a sum that is much greater than the parts.

Tips:

- When working in a voluntary, network manner, take time every now and again to ask for specific help, asking people to take on small, doable tasks.
- Recognize the contributors and their contributions.
- Be tolerant of ‘work in progress’ on wiki platforms. Not every page will always be at the same level of completion.

### ***Collective action and property rights***

Networks can be a great way to mobilize large numbers of people to help change something, do something – like raising funds, influencing policy or changing attitudes. When you activate a network, people spread the news to their networks, amplifying something, like many pebbles thrown into a pond, for example, CGIAR systemwide programme on Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI).<sup>10</sup>

CAPRI is a combination of an internal organizational structure and a community of practice devoted to supporting awareness, research and policy related to CAPRI for poverty reduction. Founded in 1995, much of the emphasis is on applications in agriculture and

natural resource management. The core constituency is in the CGIAR, but the centres are a way of connecting with many others. CAPRi has more than 214 members of the list server (community platform), 94 from the CGIAR and 51 from National Agricultural Research Systems (NARS), research centres and other organizations in developing countries. Membership of the Steering Committee and the Executive Committee is divided between these groups and other members.

CAPRi capitalizes on the ripples across the network, as well as the knowledge generated and shared closer to the core in a more communities of practice way. CAPRi is a semi-closed group whose members are at CGIAR centres who work on property rights and collective action, or those who collaborate with them. By semi-closed, it means that they can approve or decline membership applications, and some activities are limited to CGIAR members. It is structured this way because the CGIAR does not have sufficient resources to support a larger network. Only CGIAR centres can apply for research funds, and they have priority for attending the workshops, but the list server is open to all. In this way they try and straddle both internal and external needs and opportunities.

There are over 700 members who get the weekly updates. That information on funding, calls for papers, online publications and so on are all available on their blog, which people can sign up for themselves. The network offers information, workshops and even opportunities for project funding.

Here are some tips offered by coordinator Ruth Meinzen-Dick:

- Provide content. CAPRi papers are the most popular item in the email list (according to the survey), but it also provides information about other meetings, funding and jobs that people might be interested in.
- Show the relevance of the work. CAPRi produces not only working papers and books but also policy briefs and other materials that show how property rights and collective action is relevant to other fields (e.g. agriculture, poverty reduction).
- Use face-to-face meetings to re-energize the network. We have (almost) annual workshops on different topics. There are a few regulars (mostly from our Executive Committee, which is asked to attend all meetings), but each meeting brings in some new faces, both from within the CGIAR and from the outside. That generates new material and connections.
- Build on the work of related networks, organizations and events. We work closely with the International Association for Study of the Commons, an interdisciplinary professional society that is closely related to what we do, and use their meetings as a place for CAPRi members to meet, both formally and in a CAPRi reception at each meeting. We work with other networks like International Land Coalition to expand our reach. Our materials get picked up by them and vice versa.
- Always focus on the substantive issues. We try not to have business meetings that are not linked to a substantive meeting. The substantive meeting gets people excited and reminds them why they have travelled to the meeting.

### ***African Microfinance and Participatory Microfinance Group for Africa***

Many organizations are seeing the value of communities and networks. They are allocating resources and creating ways to support partners and colleagues in creating and participating in relevant communities and networks. We can think of this as a combination of ‘connect’ and ‘support’.



African Microfinance (AFMIN) is a convenor and supporter of networks – actually a network of networks. AFMIN is an association of microfinance networks in Africa, led by African microfinance practitioners and aiming to create and/or strengthen country-level microfinance networks for establishing shared performance standards, institutional capacity and policy change. AFMIN supports and keeps the wider network connected. Another example of this type is the Women of Uganda Network (WOUGNET) in Africa and (Participatory Microfinance Group for Africa) PAMIGA, a French language microfinance organization in Africa. Each of these groups knits together smaller organizations who share a similar interest or domain, providing both a platform for exchange and a larger presence on the international scene.

PAMIGA was created in 2005 by the International Centre for Research and Development (CIDR) and a number of world-recognized microfinance experts in Africa to contribute to the development and the professionalization of the sector, particularly in rural areas. PAMIGA Network is an exchange platform where Micro Finance Institutions (MFIs) have the possibility to share experiences and best practices with other institutions and actors recognized for their excellence in the African microfinance sector. This is even more crucial because PAMIGA's partner MFIs usually operate in rural areas and hence do not have access to latest innovations and improvements in the microfinance sector in terms of methodologies, products and systems.

Tips:

- If your group is too small to gain needed visibility, consider creating a network with other organizations.
- Use a network of similar organizations to keep knowledge flowing across both organizations and geography.

### *IRC*

IRC International Water and Sanitation has recognized that there is valuable knowledge sitting across all their partner organizations. As an NGO in the water, sanitation and hygiene sector, IRC realized they wanted to support communities and networks to help this knowledge flow across the sector. They currently sponsor some 20 regional and thematic groups, hosted on free, web-based email tools. They vary in size from 6 to 300 members and have very diverse levels of activity. IRC has facilitated or co-facilitated the groups since 2007. Some are very active, and some, as facilitator Jaap Pels says, like the old folk story, are simply 'waiting to be kissed' to come alive! Here is Jaap's telling of the story:

#### **Box 3. Jaap's story**

IRC started with a new business plan in 2007 (2007–2011). As senior programme manager for Knowledge Management, I felt the dialogues on the various lenses used (region/themes/topics/projects) had to be archived in such a way that future participants could jump on/off the bandwagon easily.

My analysis was that people in the development sector are good at having conversations (dialogue in corridors/venues/symposia/reviews, etc.) and are very good in using email. Based on that, I simply started some 30 Google groups in January 2007. That is, I set them up and started to invite colleagues. My thinking was that dialogues should



include the partners/people we work with and for and thus I choose Google groups. Another reason for choosing Google was my personal choice, the non-irritating advertisement and the challenge to not archive mail but offer a good search instead. I made sure the email addresses of the groups popped up in our propriety email system when users started typing an email address.

At first my colleagues had to get used to this openness. Traditionally, all my colleagues had extensive/ingenious (?) private and public folders for email on a propriety system. As they joined and the issue of open or closed discussions came out, they seemed to default to the lowest common denominator, for example, closed was chosen. All groups were closed and people could only join by invitation. Now, 3 years down the line some groups (Multiple Use Services (MUS) and Sanitation Connection) are completely open and other groups are having that discourse to open up now. It took some time for this to happen.

The focus or domain of the groups was chosen in parallel with the regions/themes/topics/projects that IRC works on. The naming of the groups shows logic: WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) and a meaningful word such as 'WASH Communication', 'WASHCost India', 'WASH Latin America' and so on to make email users' lives easy.

From day one I tried to interest my colleagues to share the administration tasks and some did. With Google groups the first screen can be edited to show an introduction, an image or logo indicating the content, but as most people follow these lists by email, they never see them. Also some external contribution is done regularly that follows this pattern: we start a list, invite people for admin/contribution and keep pushing.

The status of the groups varies. Some are dormant or dead and others vibrant and alive. We are now in a phase where we have to align channels and close some. We are experimenting with incorporating the Google groups into groups of MyWASH<sup>11</sup> (based on Ning).

#### Tips:

- The core lesson here is that email is so crucial; if no email is included in the communication around a platform, it will fail.
- Another secret for success is the fact that IRC has journalists making newsletters. They have news they will not publish in newsletters and they publish pre-press news through the lists.

#### **What about quality?**

An important question to ask about joining both communities and networks and starting them is 'How useful is this?' Some communities are vibrant and worth the time it takes to participate. Others may not be. So we need to think about evaluating quality.

There can be a distinction between communities and networks when we think about the concept of 'quality control'. In communities with their bounded membership, organizations can more easily insist upon formalized quality control mechanisms. Some communities themselves are very conscious about quality. This may mean a strict focus on the topic, so as not to waste people's time, a thoughtful process to help new people join or good stewardship of content, such as the summarization of discussion threads. They may have

an editorial review process for materials created by a community and published internally and/or externally by the organization, or a formal peer review process, such as the journals of professional associations.

At the same time, there are very informal communities with little attention or care to formalized quality control mechanisms, but which are very valuable to the members. With open networks, it is harder to impose formalized quality control mechanisms. Networks rely on a different mechanism that is sometimes called ‘The Wisdom of the Crowd’.

Because of this diversity, it is useful to think of a few questions as you evaluate your participation in communities and networks:

- How important is a rigorous peer review or quality control process for content produced by a community? If it is important, what do you see in place?
- How important are the people connecting/interacting processes such as helping people get to know each other, on-boarding of new members and attention to how the community is doing? If it is important, what evidence do you see of these practices?
- How important is openness, diversity and innovation? If it is important, how do you see the community reaching out for new ideas, members and connecting to wider networks to increase their own understanding of their domain?
- How important is privacy, full participation and closeness? If it is important, what are the requirements of membership and participation?

### Notes

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### Notes on contributor

Nancy White is an international practitioner in understanding and practicing online group facilitation of distributed work, learning and community groups (presenter, writer, teacher, coach, facilitator, rapporteur). She is a consultant at Full Circle Associates (<http://www.fullcirc.com>).

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